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ABSTRACT

For some, such as Jonathan Culler, religion is an enemy of the type of thinking the academics are trying to develop in their students. In an article in "MLA Profession '86," Culler bemoans what he sees as the dearth of religion foes among literary critics. He suggests that comparative literature teachers should lead "the critique of superstition." In a sense, Culler's position is irresponsible to his students, a disavowal of the dialogical imperative advised by Mikhail Bakhtin. Surely it is the responsibility of the writing teacher to assist the student in moving beyond a mindless reiteration of "authoritarian words," but for Culler, such authoritarian words are the only ones that religion speaks. Bakhtin's thought offers a far more complex understanding. In "Discourse and the Novel," he discusses the way in which a person's coming to identity or individual ideological consciousness is marked by a dialogic struggle between the authoritative word heard from parents and religious leaders (and teachers), and the internally persuasive word which is "open" and is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean. At times, perhaps, after the student struggles and wrestles with his or her beliefs, occasions emerge in which the authoritative and internally persuasive words speak in unison. Novels like Dostoevsky's "Brothers Karamozov," Graham Greene's "Power and the Glory," and Toni Morrison's "Beloved" serve as especially rich catalysts for such occasions. (Contains 15 references.) (TB)

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Engagements, Illuminations, and Connections: Writing out of Religious Experience and Tradition

(PRESENTED AT 1995 4'C'S MEETING, WASHINGTON D.C., MARCH 23, 1995)

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In his earliest published essay, the Russian thinker and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin asks: how can a person forge a sense of inner integrity between the realms of inspiring aesthetic experience and the humble, prosaic reality of everyday life? Bakhtin writes:

> But what guarantees the inner connection of the constituent elements of a person? Only the unity of answerability. I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. . . . Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself -- in the unity of my answerability. (1-2).

Bakhtin's answer lies in "answerability" -- or responsibility, as it is also translated -- thus pointing a way toward one of the themes of this year's CCCC conference. Much of our efforts as teachers is to assist our students in becoming answerable, responsible in this way. Our hope is that the novels, stories, essays, and poems they read, and the essays they write for our classes, will connect and perhaps illuminate the pressing issues of their own lives -- issues of love, friendship, vocation, social justice and, for many of our students, issues of faith which often provide the ground out of which these other issues stem.

In her 1993 College Composition and Communication essay on "Bakhtin and Composition Studies," Helen Rothschild Ewald cites David Bartholomae's claim that "the central purpose of the CCCC [is to make] room for a variety of voices" and that "composition studies [is] a dialogical discipline" (338). Ewald herself "call[s] for a dialogic classroom [based] on Bakhtin's concept of

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answerability" (344). She suggests, and I believe most of us would agree, that as teachers we encounter "a dialogic imperative" (343) to be answerable, or responsible to our students: to discern and respond to "where they're coming from." If we are responsible for allowing them to attempt to forge connections between the works they encounter in the classroom and their everyday lives, we must recognize that for many of our students, religious experience and tradition comprise a vital dimension of those lives. Some of us, like myself, teach in colleges and universities that have a clearly articulated religious identity. Others teach in non-denominational or state-supported schools. But we share in this responsibility if our common vocation is to assist students in their work of answerability and integrity, formation not only of critical and analytic skills, but of responsible character as well .

Some in the academy would be very suspicious of what I am suggesting. Some would say that, if anything, our work ought take the form of an unrelenting critique of religion. One prominent example is Jonathan Culler who, in MLA Profession 86, bemoaned what he saw as the dearth of religion foes among literary critics. He suggested that comparative literature teachers "[lead] the critique of superstition"(31) and consider adopting as their motto "'Down with the priests!" (32). Culler here goes beyond the sometimes salutary hermeneutic of suspicion we can bring to certain deformations of religion, and takes a stance of unrelenting, universal critique and attack. His stance reduces all religious experience to "superstition," and would thus reject out of hand what for many of our students is a vital dimension of their identity.

In The Ethics of Authenticity, Charles Taylor persuasively demonstrates the way our identities are dialogically "formed by the people we love." He writes: "Consider what we mean by 'identity.' It is 'who' we are, 'where we're coming from.' As such it is the background against which our tastes and desires

and opinions and aspirations make sense" (34). Drawing on Bakhtin, Taylor goes on to argue that we judge the value of the things we encounter against "horizons of significance" (39) that are forged through our dialogical relationships with others:

> I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands. (41)

Therefore, to authentically, in Bakhtin's words, "answer with their lives what they have experienced and understood in art," our students need to draw on their dialogically formed "horizons of significance," on that which they have inherited and which "matters crucially" to them. Culler's stance precludes such student answerability because, for him, if religion is part of that horizon it can only be as deadening superstition and ought to be attacked. His stance is thus irresponsible to students, a disavowal of "the dialogical imperative." But also irresponsible is the less extreme stance that Stephen Carter observes in The Culture of Disbelief, one that "treat[s] [religion] as an unimportant facet of human personality, one easily discarded, and one with which public-spirited citizens would not bother" (xv). This stance too would preclude from written discourse a vital dimension of identity for many students, a dimension which makes their thoughtful judgments and answerability possible.

Many will ask, however: are we not responsible to teach our students the skills of critical thinking? If for many religion has become an integral part of their identity, might it be functioning as a rigid authority that will not forbear any

questioning? In some of his final work, his "Notes Made in 1970-71," Bakhtin writes approvingly of modern literature's

> expunging [of] the sacred and authoritarian word. . .with its indisputability, unconditionality, and unequivocality. Because of its sacrosanct, impenetrable boundaries, this word is inert, and it has limited possibilities of contacts and combinations. This is the word that retards and freezes thought. The word that demands reverent repetition and not further development, corrections, and additions. The word removed from dialogue. . . (133).

Surely it is the responsibility of the writing teacher to assist the student in moving beyond a mindless reiteration of such "authoritarian words." But for Culler, such "authoritarian words" are the only ones that religion speaks. Bakhtin's thought offers a far more complex understanding. In "Discourse and the Novel," for example, he discusses the way in which a person's coming to identity or "individual ideological consciousness" (348) is marked by dialogic struggle between the "authoritative word" one has heard from parents, religious leaders, (and teachers) and the "internally persuasive word" which is "open" and "is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean" (346). But Bakhtin *also* recognizes the way in which "the authority of discourse and its internal persuasiveness may be united in a single word -- one that is *simultaneously* authoritative and internally persuasive. . ." (342). For many students, the thoughtful reading and writing they accomplish in class may provide occasions for the struggle between these "authoritative" and "internally persuasive" realms of discourse. An encounter with and engagement of a hermeneutic of suspicion -- most often by way of thinkers like Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud -- can lead to a mature insight into and critique of the ways religion can sometimes take the distorted, idolatrous forms of resentment, economic oppression, or puerile fear.[1]

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[1]See Paul Ricouer's essay "The Critique of Religion," in The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work. Ed. Charles E. Reagan/David Stewart. Boston: Beacon P, 1978.

At times, however, perhaps after this experience of struggle and wrestling, occasions emerge in which the authoritative and internally persuasive words speak in unison. I have found that novels like Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov, Graham Greene's Power and the Glory, and Toni Morrison's Beloved, with their complex transits between suspicion and trust, can serve as especially rich catalysts for such occasions.[2]

These occasions do not come cheaply but only through the effort of genuine work, attentive engagement with text and the religious tradition -- the tradition of the text and the student. Regarding such work, Jaroslav Pelikan's oft-cited distinction between tradition and traditionalism is helpful : "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living" (252). "Traditionalism" drones with the dead tones of Bakhtin's "authoritarian word." If students draw only on it in their writing, the results will have the cloying taste of platitude. "Tradition," in contrast, rings with the vital sounds of questions asked and connections forged. As Robert Bellah and his fellow authors comment in Habits of the Heart: "A living tradition is never a program for automatic moral judgments. It is always in a continuous process of reinterpretation and reappropriation. Such a process assumes, however, that tradition has enough authority for the search for its present meaning to be publicly pursued as a common project" (140-41). Living tradition invites and embodies dialogue between present and past.

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[2] For a very fine discussion of the strains of suspicion and trust in contemporary literary theory, see James Champion's "Sacramental and Prophetic Interpretation." In Literature and Theology: Thinking to 2000. Atlanta: Scholars Press: 1994.

Pelikan cites another epigram, by Goethe, which suggests not only, as he puts it, "a lietmotiv of the scholarly life" but also a way of approaching one's religious heritage and experience as tradition rather than traditionalism:

> What you have as heritage,
> Take now as task;
> For thus you will make it your own! (102)

If students draw upon a faith that is approached as daily task -- still vital because it is humming with questions and open to new, surprising slants of insight -- the written results will be far more illuminating, and more likely will it be that art and life find connection through the linkage of responsibility, but perhaps too the realms of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. What students have worked through as task becomes their own.

Some concrete examples would be helpful here. I will point here to two, though I could offer many others. Last summer, I had the good fortune to work with a gifted sophomore student on an NEH Younger Scholars Project in which she discerned linkages between the thought of Martin Luther and Immanuel Kant. The final essay the student produced is masterful, but it had its genesis in a shorter paper she had written as a freshman. In that paper, instead of focusing only on Kant's Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals as was assigned, the student wished to forge links between Kant's work and St. Augustine's Confessions, which we had read the previous semester, and, Luther a figure very familiar to her from her own tradition, but whom we hadn't studied in class. By linking her analysis of Kant's ethical philosophy with work within her religious tradition, she not only produced a work of first rate philosophical analysis which revealed illuminating connections between the thought of the two men, but grew herself in an understanding and appreciation of her own tradition. In the course of the project, she writes, the ideas of both

thinkers "became dear to [her]." And she insists on the vital importance that paths such as the one she took be open to students. She writes:

> [I]gnoring religion [in the classroom] loses the significance of the student because it relegates the student's most pressing concerns to the periphery. It presupposes that the questions that haunted Dostoevsky, prodded Kant, and inspired Luther are less the focus of these men's work and more personality abnormalities. This attitude convinces the student , as well, that perhaps the difficult questions facing her should be sacrificed for the higher good of 'serious study.' Nothing could be more detrimental to the purpose of education.

Another fine student, now at a top-flight graduate school, comes to mind. In an upper-level seminar in which we read Walker Percy's Second Coming, the student grew intrigued with way in which characters in the novel seem to be portrayed as in some way grace-bearing. She found herself wondering about the sacramental emphasis of the Catholic tradition she shared with Percy. Her exploration of this theme in Percy's novel led her on the path to an honors thesis on the sacramental quality of human work. In preparation for her thesis, she immersed herself in twentieth century Catholic theology, and came away not only with a clearer critical grasp of her subject, but a more vital sense of her tradition as well. She too looked back on her project, and writes:

> Working so intently on the sacramental process brought me much closer to the Catholic faith I grew up with, because I had to discipline my thought, and carefully examine and articulate my "conclusions" and beliefs on the subject. I had to hold up this definition of sacrament to the scrutiny of my own eyes, as well as those of my professor and other students, many of whom grew up in other religious traditions. . . . I'd like to say that dealing with religion "objectively" helped me formulate a rational understanding of myfaith that I was then able to incorporate into my own life. However, . . . I could never consider my research and writing on the subject "objective." It was a heavily subjective engagement, a constant interaction between personal experience and intellectual process and expectations. I think it was this movement between personal interest (and all the questions of self, faith, fear, history, . . . that accompany it) and academic discipline that helped me gain a greater understanding not only of the

histories and theories of work and sacrament, but of myself in relation to [them] as well. By applying theological understanding of sacrament to everyday life and practice within the discipline of academic study -- within the confines of a structured argument -- I was able to struggle through, and eventually organize, my own thoughts on religion. I was able to articulate my faith and the important role it played in my life, and to act on this and begin practicing my faith regularly again (which I had only done off-and-on in my college years before this time). . . .

For both of these students, this "interaction between personal experience and intellectual process" proved formative in their development as both scholars and persons.

Now these examples are of course drawn from life at a Lutheran University which affirms a belief in the "creative relationship between faith and learning." But I believe that they are examples relevant to teachers in private and state-supported schools as well. In a 1992 essay in Cross Currents, Susan Handelman writes of her own reluctance to discuss questions of personal faith given her work at "a public, state-supported university" (309). When, however, she explores the etymology of the Hebrew word for faith, "emunah," she discovers its affinities with the word "education." "Faith," she writes, "is connected to education and training in its very root. . . .[E]ducation and faith both require much nursing and nurturing. . . . We need, in educating our students, to remember not only that we are 'rigorously training them in critical thinking,' but that we are also 'nursing and nurturing them.' To nurse or nurture is to affirm, to care for, to have faith in someone" (294-95). Toward the end of her essay, reflecting on the Latin roots of education alongside the journal reflections of one of her students, Handelman reaffirms the need for critical distance in our work with texts. But she adds that we ought not ignore this nurturing dimension of education: "perhaps we are overdoing it with all our emphasis on 'critical thinking.' After we undermine all their native beliefs, we do

not do a very good job of helping students reintegrate their emotional and religious lives into their newly found sophisticated analytic minds" (310).

Thus taking her own religious heritage as task, Handelman recovers the virtue of faith as a way in which she can assist her students in the work of integrating their class reading and writing with their inner lives. I would suggest that the practice of at least two other virtues is vital in our work in helping students in such integrative work: humility and charity. In To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education, Parker Palmer writes of humility as "the virtue that allows us to pay attention to 'the other' -- be it student or subject -- whose integrity and voice are so central to knowing and teaching in truth" (108). Such granting of attention to the other is difficult, and requires "obedience," the root sense of which, Palmer points out, is "'to listen.' Obedience requires the discerning ear, the ear that listens for the reality of the situation, a listening that allows the hearer to respond to that reality, whatever it may be." Thus our "dialogical imperative": the challenge we face to "respond obediently to the reality of [our] students' lives" (43). In our one-to-one meetings with students, if we listen attentively enough, we might discern the connections students are attempting to make between the literature they are reading and the religious questions of their inner lives. But such attentive listening requires humility, the willingness to put aside our own opinions and answers. In her essay on "School Studies," Simone Weil points to the great difficulty the act of attention entails, and makes clear its link to humility: "The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth" (115).

Weil also suggests the connection between the effort of attention and the love of neighbor, or charity, which is the third virtue the teacher employs when assisting students in their work of connection. I especially like the way in which

a writer from my own religious tradition, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, links this virtue with the work of education: "Some seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; that is curiosity. Others seek knowledge that they may themselves be known; that is vanity. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others. And that is charity" (Schwehn, "University" 455).[3]

I believe we serve our students best and answer our "dialogic imperative" most fully when we attend to the student striving to integrate the works of literature she reads and the life she is attempting to live, and, more specifically, the religious tradition she may have inherited and the developing of her own voice.

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[3] Bernard's words are also cited in Mark R. Schwehn's Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America (New York: Oxford, 1993), p. 60. Schwehn's book includes an extensive discussion of the place of the virtues in the college classroom; like Palmer, he points to the virtues of faith, humility, and love (charity or caritas) (See Chapter Three, "Spirited Inquiry.")

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